



On Interpreting Bazin

Hugh Gray; Brian Henderson

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This time it's the jubilant union delegates, who tell the dazed Masa that the strike is settled, that he's been reinstated, and that the workers have won "a great victory." "It's the first time in our region that a worker fired for political activities has been reinstated." The irony of this is beautiful. All through the film, we, along with Massa, have gradually achieved a gut-level awareness of just how dehumanizing life in a factory really is; and now the "great victory" of the reformist unions merely allows a worker who was fired for rebelling against the intolerable system to go back to work under that same intolerable system . . . and be thankful for the chance. "And what's more," the union men add, "we won the pay increases on piece-work."

So the next day, life at the factory returns to normal. Once again the workers, Massa among them, file through the factory gates while Maoist militants with bullhorns try to stir them up: "The sun isn't even up yet and you're going into the factory. When you come out it will be night. You won't see the sun today."

But the film doesn't quite end yet. In a brief concluding sequence we see Massa back at work. Only now, instead of turning out pieces on his own machine, he's at work on the assembly line. As always, there's a lot of machine-noise, but Massa manages to shout loud enough to communicate with the man next to him, telling him about a dream he had the previous night. As Massa recounts the dream, the man next to him repeats the story, in turn, to the next man down the line, and so on. Massa's dream, very similar to the one Militina recounted to Massa earlier, is about breaking down the wall to Paradise.

When they hear it was a dream about Paradise, the workers each ask "How about me, was I there too?" And the word gets passed on that all of them were there together in Paradise. Another question gets passed back up the line to Massa: "What were we doing?" But before we get a chance to hear the answer the camera suddenly picks up a worker pushing a cart and, in a panning movement, follows him as he goes down the assembly line. At the end of the line he swings the cart into place, adjusting it to pick

up the finished product as it rolls off the assembly line.

But just as he gets ready for the pick-up, the film ends: the shot freezes. We never see the finished product. It remains a mystery, although a huge finger painted on the wall points down ominously and insistently to the spot where the end-product of the worker's labor should be.

Having some of the qualities of a dream itself, this conclusion seems to suggest that even workers' dreams are likely to be linear, mechanical models wherein all it would take to achieve a workers' paradise would be—as Militina, in his younger days, had demanded—knowledge of what product they were working on. Unfortunately, as old Militina now realizes—in his madness?—the task of achieving a workers' paradise requires, among other things, guns . . . and the willingness to knock down walls.

But the walls that present the biggest obstacles, as Petri's film provocatively emphasizes, may be the walls imposed on the workers' minds—barriers erected by an industrial capitalist system which insidiously perpetuates the vulnerability of the exploited worker by imprinting its machine-patterns on even the deepest level of his character.

Correspondence & Controversy

ON INTERPRETING BAZIN

There is a complexity about Brian Henderson's analysis of the structure of Bazin's thought that, I cannot but feel, would have surprised Bazin as much as it puzzles me. This is not to say that Mr. Henderson must therefore be mistaken, only that I find it hard to accept on the basis of his analysis that what I have so long felt to be so much of a piece, so whole and, while full of

paradox, so basically without contradiction or self-conflicting concepts, is in many respects the opposite.

No one, it has always seemed to me, has held more consistently that the ontology and the philosophy of film are inseparably and casually connected. Nor, may I add, although this is not the main point at issue, do I know of any critic (except his friend Amédée Ayfre) whose ontology has such historically respectable roots in the schools of the west.

Surely nothing more succinctly and neatly summarizes Bazin's historic - ontological approach to cinema than the analogy of the *asymptote*. Nor could he have put it more clearly than in his expression of a belief that the year 2000 will salute the advent of a cinema free of the artificialities of montage, renouncing the role of an "art of reality" so that it may climb to its final level on which it will become, once and for all "reality made art"—a possibility that he sees foreshadowed in the films of de Sica-Zavattini. One might even say that here ontology and history are fused!

Introductions are notoriously unread and the only reference publicly made to my attempts to deal (in the introduction to Vol. II) with the ontology of Bazin's history and the history of his ontology dismissed me as a would-be erudite showoff. May I ask Mr. Henderson to ignore that warning and to glance at those pages and to reread, especially, the essays on neorealism. He will then see how it could be that I might be puzzled along with others who are reading his interesting study of Bazin's thought.

Perhaps he would also be so kind as to indicate who the writers are in France, England and America who are engaged in the "healthy and necessary process of going beyond Bazin"? What and where is this "beyond" for which these scurrying critics are headed? Perhaps in his third installment Mr. Henderson—whose intelligence and integrity I deeply respect—will clear up these points for some of us.

—HUGH GRAY

[Translator of *What Is Cinema?*]

REPLY

Gray proposes a simple Bazin, whom I have made complex. He does not, unfortunately, address my arguments specifically. Gray still finds Bazin consistent and unified; my arguments to the contrary must be faulty, but how are they so? Gray perhaps suggests that a thinker is presumed consistent until proven inconsistent, as though: innocent until proven guilty. Since I have failed to make out the opposite case (or at least failed to convince Gray), the consistency of Bazin's system stands. Gray may therefore ask me in effect to begin all over again and to tell the court, on new grounds, why Bazin is inconsistent. But in thought, unlike law, consistency is no more a presumption than its opposite. In order to make out a case for the unity of Bazin's system, Gray (or someone else) would first have to construct it—identifying the principal premises, showing their interrelations, etc. This has not been done.

Under the terms of Gray's criticism, I am to reread his introduction to Volume II, reread Bazin's essays on neorealism, and then, it seems, to recant of my own free will. I've done my rereading and I do not recant. The historical background which Gray's introduction provides is quite interesting; it does not, however, settle the question of the meaning of the texts written by Bazin. It is this question which my article addresses. I will not reproduce my arguments here; I will only recall certain of the more important areas of inconsistency (or problem areas) discovered in the Bazin texts. At the theoretical level, Bazin uses the concepts of reality and relation to reality in at least three ways: physical and social reality as recorded by the camera; in the case of adaptations from the theater, the reality of the play's text, its theatricality; and the reality of film history. Fidelity to each of these realities is different. Fidelity to physical reality is apparently inherent in photographic reproduction but is achieved well or badly by different shooting and cutting styles. Directors of adaptations must be faithful to the theatricality of the text; here the introduction of physical and social reality may be ruinous to the film. The film critic must be faithful to the

reality of film history, which includes all film styles and all modes of adaptation known. Bazin uses the concept of film history or himself writes about film history in at least three ways also. "Theater and Cinema" and "In Defense of Mixed Cinema" concern large-scale developments in the international film industry, 1940-1952, principally its turning to plays and novels for film subjects. In the majority of Bazin's essays, individual films and directors are chosen and discussed by Bazin as aesthetic highpoints within film history, conceived on an art-historical model of formal innovation and excellence. (My original article argues that reality means something different in each of these essays. Visconti's "aesthetic realism," Fellini's "poetic realism," etc.) "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" propounds a version of film history wherein film production as a whole has become more realistic at each of several technological stages: sound, panchromatic stock, composition in depth, etc. These are some of the opposing directions in which Bazin's work goes; I leave it to the reader to work out the strictly logical consistencies and inconsistencies involved, if interested. It is true that Bazin sometimes uses the analogy of the asymptote, but he speaks of reality and history in the other ways I have indicated also.

Despite my protests, I will do some self-criticism anyway. Though I adhere to its principal analyses and conclusions, certain aspects of my article were unclear and perhaps misleading. I over-simplified in suggesting (at times) a clear-cut, overall conflict between ontology and history, when these are more accurately tendencies or motifs which overlap and interweave in many different ways in Bazin's work. (If anything, then, my analysis of Bazin's thought is insufficiently complex.) This over-schematizing is accentuated by the rhetorical form of the article, which proposes a division in Bazin's work, marshals arguments in support of this thesis, then returns to it and restates it in conclusion. This conclusion—that Bazin is inconsistent—is not very interesting in itself and it leads nowhere. I should have assumed Bazin's inconsistencies at

the outset and proceeded to explore them in an open-minded way. I should have dropped the propositional-conclusory form, which suggests that I have the answers in advance, and adopted an investigatory form. As it is, the piece begins several explorations which are somewhat curtailed by its rigidified form. There is another point about the inconsistency theme. This was not meant as a criticism of Bazin: inconsistent therefore deficient. Since Hegel we know that contradictions are the constituent elements of thought systems and their link with later work also. We analyze the contradictions in a body of work in order to see how it is put together (dismantling = demystification) and to determine what it cannot explain. The premises we differentiate can then be put together differently or combined with others to produce new theoretical structures overcoming previous contradictions. Thus contradictions in Bazin are both a key to his work as it stands and a key to post-Bazinian developments as well. In short, film theoretical work, like other kinds, will often be this plodding activity of deriving and reworking premises through the method of consistency.

That there is a great deal more to discover in Bazin, especially in Volume II, I am sure Gray and I agree. But film people seem to be bored with Bazin now, few have read Volume II carefully. And they are certainly bored with neorealism. Nevertheless (I assert) Bazin's neorealist essays contain the key to Rossellini, the key to Fellini, even perhaps the key to Visconti. Bazin's essays on these directors remain the best written on them, often illuminating films made by them after his death. And through these figures, other figures are illuminated. Any key to Rossellini is at least half a key to Godard. Any key to Rossellini and Godard is at least two thirds a key to Bertolucci. Of course I exaggerate. There are in any case no ultimate keys. One must agree with Barthes that every critic is "utterly subjective, utterly historical." Still, due partly to the paradox that all of his favorite directors are still making films, Bazin remains not only better than contemporary critics but even more contemporary than they are. And while

FILM REVIEWS

we are on the subject, it becomes necessary to urge Hugh Gray and the University of California Press to carry through their Bazin project to its end, by translating the rest of *Qu'est-ce que le Cinéma?* There are essential things remaining, the essays on *Senso*, *La Strada*, *Il Bidone*, *Europa 51*, *L'Oro di Napoli*, *Los Olvidados*, and many others. We must have these.

—BRIAN HENDERSON

Film Reviews

SOUNDER

Director: Martin Ritt. Producer: Robert Radnitz. Script: Lonnie Elder III. Photography: John A. Alonzo. Twentieth Century-Fox.

Sounder is a celebration of black American life. It shows us a family of sharecroppers in the Depression who, despite the continual, inescapable social, political, and economic injustice waged against them—as against all black Americans—survive not just physically but spiritually as well: each member whole in himself and the family itself intact, despite the year-long separation of the father. In showing us this family, the film tells us, or shows us, that black Americans have as rich a tradition as white Americans or any other group; that their lives have been full of strength, joy, family feeling, and heroism; that even while excluded from, or oppressed within, the mainstream of American society they have been as much part of the land, as *American*, as any other Americans. The film does this with a full sense of the weight of the injustice, of the continual suffering it causes, and of the need to eliminate it.

Thus the film escapes the old benign racist stereotype of blacks as content in their depriva-



SOUNDER

tion because their needs and potential as human beings are so much less than those of white people. At the same time, it escapes the countervailing modern white liberal or radical view which sees blacks as *only* a social problem or sees them as people *only* negatively: as maimed, deprived, suffering, destroyed. Answering a white critic who seemed to feel "that unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience," who seemed to look at a black man and see "not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell," Ralph Ellison wrote:

But there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's anguish for gain or sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best have always done. It